DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 061 272 TM 001 207

AUTHOR Womble, Melodie L.
TITLE Public School Research--The Two-Faced Profession.
PUB DATE Apr 72
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, Illinois, April 1972)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Attitudes; Citizen Participation; *Communication Problems; *Community Attitudes; Community Relations; Decision Making; *Educational Researchers; Information Needs; Media Research; Public Opinion; *Public Relations; Public Support; Research Needs; School Administration; *School Community Relationship; Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the difficulties facing educational researchers in communicating with other professionals and with the public. Public knowledge of the schools and attitudes toward them, community relations problems, and general communications problems are discussed. A program for school researchers is recommended. (DG)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED 061272

"Public School Research - The Two-Faced Profession"

Melodie L. Womble, Dallas Independent School District

Researchers have been charged with the responsibility of studying and evaluating possible solutions to the problems perplexing public school educators today. Simultaneously, researchers are faced with another challenge--communicating with people other than trained researchers. In public school research, the practitioner's job has two faces -- one is professional integrity and commitment to technological advancement, and the other is impact on practice in public schools. To achieve the latter, the researcher must be able to communicate the significance and scope of his results to the decision makers and users. This does not mean that a researcher must compromise professional integrity to achieve a desired impact on public school education, but rather, that he is communicating with a different audience, and consequently, must employ different techniques.

In addition, public school researchers represent a unique entity in the education profession in that they are highly trained, highly skilled, technicians assigned the specific task of providing impartial techniques, observations, and evaluations. Consequently, unlike the researcher in business and medicine whose work is viewed as a promise of a better tomorrow, the educational researcher's task is often viewed as a threat to the status quo. Whereas corporation managers and physicians generally look to research for help, educators often view research with alarm. Therefore, besides communicating with a non-technical audience, the educational researcher has the added burden of dispelling this image. If he learns to do the former well, the latter will take care of itself.

The public school researcher must learn to communicate with each of his publics -- school board members, superintendents, various administrators, teachers, students, members of the press, and the community. Although the school board and top level administrators are generally considered primary decision makers, one cannot overlook the fact that once the classroom door is closed, the teacher is his own taskmaster. Teachers daily make decisions that make a difference. Consequently, teachers need adequate information upon which to make decisions. Ultimately, the success of any program depends upon the acceptance and support of the people who will be effected by it. The most tightly knit design, most exact sampling procedure, and most significant results are not worth the journal paper published on if the results, techniques, and/or instruments remain unused because people who should be using them do not fully comprehend their meaning.

202 100 MT

If a public school researcher is to do more than add to the volumes of technological reports, he must develop a communication scheme to involve and inform the decision makers and users. At one time, even Karl Pearson did not know correlation coefficients. One has to be taught. A researcher also can learn to communicate with his audiences and bridge the gap between reported results and instituted change.

Objective of Paper. The Communications and Community Relations Department of the Dallas Independent School District conducted four studies last year to (1) determine how citizens and educators felt about their schools, what they knew about the education program, and what types of communication techniques provided them with the most information; (2) evaluate various communication techniques and procedures; and (3) ascertain various attitudes toward the role of communication in the public school. Although these studies were conducted to help the Communications Department devise a more effective communications plan for the school district, many of the results and conclusions can be applied to a communications program for educational researchers. Methods and techniques for educational communication are similar regardless of the content of the message. Consequently, this paper will review the four studies conducted in the Dallas Independent School District, and, based upon the results and the experiences as well as the observations of the Communications Department staff, suggest a communication plan to help educational researchers better inform their publics.

REVIEW OF FOUR STUDIES

Problem. Until recent years, many educators attempted to protect their domain and shield the public from adverse stories about the condition and quality of the school program. Rarely was the protective process or its perpetrators questioned. But, such is not the case today. Citizens are demanding a voice in education, and the once unblemished record of innumerable school districts is now marked with financial deficit, deterioration, and diminishing public support. This is evidenced by the Chicago schools planning to close 12 days early this year, Kansas City and New York City schools laying off teachers, Los Angeles shortening its school day by one hour,and over half of the school bond elections across the country in the last two years being defeated at the polls. Unless educators develop new communication strategies, designed to let constituents know the how, what, where, when, why and who of school programs, citizen understanding and support will continue to diminish and pose a more serious threat to the survival of public education, Similarly, educators must become aware of how the public feels about their schools and what is expected from the schools.

Related Studies. Citizen interest and participation in education was apparent in Dallas in 1971 as each school principal selected a parent advisory committee, in addition to his PTA group, to assist him in decision-making, and as citizens served the Board of Education on a variety of school committees from free lunch and breakfast advisory groups to textbook committees and curriculum councils, such as those on bi-lingual education and sex education. In addition, the volunteer program in the schools had grown from 22 persons to over 1500 in three years. During the preceding year, the Board of Education had conducted monthly meetings at various school locations throughout the city. Topics at these RAP sessions included educational problems on the local, state, and national levels. Following each meeting, reactionnaires were distributed to participants to discover their thoughts about the meetings and the total school program. It was evident from comments that 1) the meetings had provided a better understanding of what was happening in the schools and 2) more opportunities to learn about school programs were desired.

According to a survey conducted by George Gallup in 1969, the public is only fairly well informed about their schools and very poorly informed about education in general. Most of the information the public possesses about schools comes either from newspapers or from radio or television programs, and public knowledge of curriculum and the goals of education is at best, very limited.[1] In a follow-up study in 1970, over 60 percent of Gallup's respondents with children in public schools said they would like to know more about the schools.[2]

Design of the Studies. While each of the four studies was unique, they were interrelated, with portions of each follow-up instrument providing comparative data for one of the other studies. This was partly planned and necessary in order to lower both expense and the amount of materials distributed.

Community Study. The major study undertaken was the Community Survey which attempted to discover the public's feelings and expectations regarding the schools, what citizens knew about specific programs, and what, if any, contact the public had with the schools. Approximately one-third of the questions used in the survey were similar to questions used in the 1969 Gallup poll as a means of providing for comparison with the national survey.

---

1 George Gallup, "How the Nation Views the Public School," Princeton, 1969.

2 George Gallup, "Second Annual Survey of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools," Phi Delta Kappan LII, October, 1970, p. 109.

Two high schools and their feeder schools were chosen to serve as the experimental and control groups, The areas were predominately lower middle and middle class with approximately 90 percent white residents. Consequently, the results were somewhat limited.

A decentralized communications project was conducted in the experimental area. An administrative intern worked with principals in developing communication plans for use within the school and community. Emphasis was placed on informal, personal communication, and involvement, in addition to written communiques. The control district continued to use typical communication methods such as PTA programs, newsletters, and flyers.

Due to time and financial restraints, only half as many respondents were selected from the control group. Zoning maps were obtained from the census office and a grid of one inch squares placed over each map. Each square was numbered and contained approximately 10 household units. Apartments, trailers, and duplexes were identified and a proportionate number of grids chosen using a table of random numbers for selection. The remainder of the grids were chosen from the household units until 100 grids had been selected in the experimental district and 50 in the control district. A table of random numbers was used for the selection.

Interviewers included volunteer PTA mothers, teachers, administrative interns, and some students. Each interviewer was briefed on using the questionnaire and given a map, badge, and letter of identification from the superintendent.

Every dwelling in each grid was contacted. Over 99 percent of the sample was contacted and the questionnaire completed. The remaining portion was either unoccupied housing or elderly couples who refused to complete the survey. The completed questionnaires were numbered and, six months later, 100 dwelling units were randomly selected from the experimental and 50 dwelling units from the control district for a second administration of the instrument.

Only administrative interns were used as interviewers due to the small sub-sample. Approximately half of the subjects were contacted prior to summer vacation and a court ruling effecting the District's desegregation policies. The completion of the follow-up was cancelled due to the effects of recent history. Although, it may have been interesting to record the effects of history on the attitudes of the public, the effects of it on the time of school personnel prohibited completion.

Decentralized Communication Study - Teachers and Principals. Two additional studies were conducted in conjunction with the Community Survey. These studies attempted to ascertain the frequency of contacts made by teachers and principals with parents, the reasons for such contacts, and the amount of parental involvement currently in progress in the schools. A census was used in both of these studies as the populations were relatively small and base line data was being obtained. It was felt that each subject should be questioned in order to obtain the most accurate data base possible. Questionnaires were sent through the school district mail to 21 principals and 500 teachers in the two high school districts involved in the decentralized study mentioned earlier. A cover letter signed by the superintendent was attached to the instrument. Follow-up instruments were sent in a similar fashion six months later. Response from the principal group was 100 percent for each administration. Teacher response was slightly less with 90 percent return on the first administration and 75 percent return on the follow-up.

The decrease in teacher response on the follow-up probably best can be explained by the fact that only four weeks remained in the school year. Questionnaires were coded only by school, therefore an individual follow-up was impossible. A sign test was performed on the changes in involvement and the types of involvement.

Follow-up instruments contained additional sections which provided information for comparison with other studies. The follow-up questionnaire sent to teachers included a section which asked teachers to answer a series of questions as they felt parents in the school community would. These questions dealt with five key issues asked in the Community Survey and also covered in the 1969 Gallup poll, namely, problems facing education today, what should schools be teaching students, teacher salaries, and how school systems compare. Chi-square was computed on the frequency of responses for each category in each question comparing the teacher response and community response.

The follow-up questionnaire for the principals was sent not only to the 21 principals in the decentralized communication study area but to each of the district's 188 principals, as it included sections which attempted to ascertain the effects of various communication publications distributed throughout the year, and the actual practice and procedures followed in the schools for communication internally and to the community. This served as a follow-up to the following study.

Administrators Workshop Study. During an administrators' summer workshop, two communication programs were underway including a two-hour workshop and a half-hour speech presentation on communications. Consequently, this study attempted to determine the effects of the workshop and the speech on changing attitudes toward communications. In addition, the survey attempted to ascertain administrators' attitudes and concepts of what a communications plan should be for a school. Due to the small population and convenience, census was used. Approximately 450 administrators were involved in the workshop and participated in at least one of the communication presentations. The majority heard only the speech, with approximately 100 attending the workshop and also hearing the speech. Respondents were questioned prior to each activity and following each activity.

RESULTS

Some of the results of these four studies which apply to the objective of this paper include the following:

1. Approximately 60 percent of the parent respondents said they had not received any newsletters, pamphlets, or other material describing the activities of the local school in their area.

2. Two-thirds of the respondents had read articles in the newspapers about the district or seen something on television whereas less than one half had heard anything on radio.

3. Newspapers and word of mouth were rated as the one and two best sources of information. This was identical to the national survey.

4. Nearly three-fourths said that they would like to know more about the schools, as compared with 65 percent nationally.

5. An average of 65 percent was not familiar with major educational programs and/or problems such as flexible scheduling, swimming programs, vocational education, early childhood education, staff development, drop-out rates, classroom shortages, and numbers of graduates attending college.

6. No significant change or trend was indicated in the number of involvements or types of involvement in either the experimental or control groups.

7. Elementary teachers more accurately predicted how parents would answer five major questions, however, the teachers as a group did answer many items differently, particularly those pertaining to what schools should be teaching children and the status of teachers salary.

8. Respondents attending the communications workshop showed a greater change of attitudes in the "right" direction than those who attended only the speech.

9. Over 90 per cent of the administrators said that every school should have a written communication policy and someone to carry it out; over 70 per cent indicated that they did not have a written policy.

10. Over 70 per cent of the administrators said they should meet informally with parents; less than 40 per cent actually met monthly with parents in an informal manner.

11. Nearly 90 per cent said student advisory committees should be formed; only half had created such a council.

12. Nearly 90 per cent said teachers should be consulted in some manner on issues which concern them; Approximately one-third met with teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

Citizens of Dallas, like in other communities, are not familar with major programs underway in the school district, and they want to know more about the school district. People prefer informal, face-to-face communication, and where formal presentations are employed, the public prefers those which use technological aids such as charts, films, tapes, and the like. In addition, each of the publics seemed to prefer simple, direct communication which capsulized situations or was presented in a unique format.

People want to be involved in those decisions which will effect them and their jobs or children. Although involvement was preached, it was not practiced. Elementary teachers seem to have a better knowledge of their community's feelings probably because elementary teachers have more individual contact with parents, either by personal visit, phone call, or note. The data seemed to indicate that a communication gap existed between administrators and teachers, and the central office and the community.

Recommendations for Researchers. Based on the results of these studies and other observations made by staff of the Communications Department, the following program for public school researchers is recommended:

1. Create a need for research with the decision makers.
2. Develop a planned program of regular communication between the research department and the decision makers.
3. Write results which are positive, brief, and simple.
4. Develop brochures presenting research's impact on education, including a glossary of terms.
5. Prepare a slide-tape presentation of the research department's involvement in district programs.
6. Hold workshops for district personnel who use research results and/or who are involved in the research projects.
7. Develop good press relations. Hold briefings and conferences.
8. Establish a "hot-line" or information center.
9. Appoint a communications contact for each research study.
10. Develop feedback instruments to ascertain administrators questions about research and suggestions for programs.
11. Take advantage of informal face-to-face gatherings.
12. Institute short-term and/or long-term research internship program and/or sabbatical leave program to involve administrators in the department.

Answers to mankind's riddles are useless if they cannot be communicated. Public school researchers owe it to the future of public education to be "two-faced" and have maximum impact on educational practice as well as technological advancement.